

SAGEBRUSH HEADLIGHT

VOL. 23, NO. 2

NEWSLETTER OF THE NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM

84th Edit.

THE YERINGTON & BLISS WOODYARD FIRE OF 1877



Carson & Tahoe Lumber & Fluming Company lumber yard. Carlton Watkins Photo, NSRM.

By Rich Pitter

“Fire!” A watchman sounded the alarm shortly after dark on Friday, November 2, 1877.

The Yerington and Bliss Company wood and lumber yard was burning. The alarm was hurriedly relayed a mile north into Carson City. As the volunteer Swift Engine Company rolled their steam engine, the *S. T. Swift* out of the firehouse, J. M. “Doc” Benton, owner of Benton’s Stables, donated a

team of horses to pull the steamer to the fire. This saved valuable time, since fire engines were drawn by manpower.

The Virginia and Truckee Railroad Company’s yard locomotive No. 9, the *I. E. James*, passed the *S. T. Swift* on route to the wood yard and claimed the rights to “first water.” The *I. E. James* had a steam-powered fire engine mounted on top of its boiler. The fire laddies of Curry Engine Company No. 2 of Carson City arrived soon after the *Swift*, pulling their hand pumper. By prior agreement, Carson City’s other fire company,

Warren Engine Co. No. 1, remained in town in case another fire broke out.

The Yerington and Bliss Company wood and lumber yard was half a mile long; the northern sections held square cut timbers for the Comstock mines and other sawed lumber and planking. The southern part, divided into three 400-foot long “blocks,” held immense stacks of cordwood, 16 feet high and 50 feet wide, between the flumes and railroad tracks. This wood was harvested on company property on the western shores of Lake

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Symposium Is Back!

The Nevada State Railroad Museum is pleased to announce the return of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad History Symposium. This year's theme is The Virginia & Truckee and its Impact on the Cities it Served. Back again is Walter Gray III, California State Archivist, and he will be the keynote speaker.

Well known V&T historians Dale Darney, Stephen Drew, and Charlie Seibenthal will speak during sessions. Gold Hill historian Matt Stanley and Nevada State Historian Bob Nylen will also speak. Bob Dockery will show a slide program covering the cities in a "Now and Then" format.

The Symposium is conducting off site tours during the sessions. This is an opportunity to add variety to your visit and see parts of the region so often passed by. You may visit the remarkable Thunderbird Lodge on Lake Tahoe in a guided tour and lunch event on Friday.

The secluded Lodge was built in 1936 by George Whitell and has only recently become available for public visitation. This rare opportunity allows Symposium attendees a three hour visit and comes with transportation, lunch and a tour.

On Saturday, you can enjoy the "Carson City Ghost Walk." This guided tour of the Historic District of Carson City is a local favorite.

Finally, on Sunday, NSRM staff will lead a walk on the right of way of the Carson & Tahoe Lumber & Fluming Company. This trip will take members on some of the most picturesque land in the region. Each participant will receive a publication with maps, photos and a brief history of the line. Nevada State Museum Natural History Curator George Baumgartner will discuss flora and fauna. The hike is strenuous and covers nearly 600 feet in elevation.

NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM

OPERATING SCHEDULE

STEAM UPS

2002

October 20 (Sunday) Symposium
October 26 (Saturday) Nevada Day Parade
November 29 & 30 (Friday & Saturday) Thanksgiving Weekend
December 14 & 15 (Saturday & Sunday) Santa Train

2003

May Armed Forces Day
May Memorial Day
June Father's Day
July Fourth of July Weekend

Steam Train operates 10:00 am - 4:00 pm

Fares: Adults, \$2.50, Children 6-11, \$1.00, 5 and under FREE

SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Friends-

The motorcar crew has been busy with school tours and other special events. The Chinese exhibit is coming along under the craftsmanship of Brian Sheldon. It will be a great addition to the current displays at the Museum. The photo exhibit has been an outstanding success. It is still up for a short time, so if you have not experienced it, be sure to get in real soon, as you would not want to be the only kid on your block to miss it.

As you may have noticed, there have been some great articles in the last couple of issues. I would like to thank those members who submitted them and remind the rest of you that we need many more, so keep them coming. You do not need to be a professional writer to submit an article. All entries will be reviewed and if used, will be edited for spelling or grammar. This newsletter goes through a rigorous review before it is published.

The upcoming season promises to be a great one with lots of planned activities and special functions. If you currently do not volunteer, please give it your strongest consideration, as we can certainly use your talents and expertise. Every segment of the institution needs additional people. We can use everyone from sixteen to one hundred sixteen. Your talents will not go unused. By volunteering, you have the opportunity to make new friends and also have the opportunity to feel good about yourself, knowing that you helped make this Museum a great experience for the visitors. So, please commit your time and have lots of fun with your friends and the visitors.

Thanks to all who have been volunteering and dedicating your valuable time and expertise to the museum. It is greatly appreciated by the staff and by the Board of Directors. Again, thank you. Here's hoping to see all of you real soon.

- Ron Allen, President.

AROUND THE MUSEUM...

Two new employees have joined the staff at the Nevada State Railroad Museum. Melissa Hogue has accepted the duties of museum attendant and Jane O'Cain has accepted the challenges of NSRM's collections as curator of history/collections manager.

Melissa Hogue came to the museum from the private sector. She will be managing the daily operations of the museum. Her background is primarily retail management. She has worked with JC Penney, Clotheshime and finally Harley Davidson as a store manager. She has extensive experience in retail trade and customer service. Melissa has enjoyed all of her past jobs as she learned many valuable skills and worked with many interesting people.

Jane O'Cain joined the staff of the NSRM as the curator of history/collections manager on August 5. Before joining us, she had been a curator at the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum in Las Cruces, New Mexico, for the past seven years. O'Cain holds a Master of Arts degree in cultural anthropology/museum studies and a Master of Arts degree in history; her undergraduate degree is in sociology/psychology.

Jane's initial work at the museum will include writing a collections policy and procedure manual, inventorying and cataloging the artifact collection, and arranging and describing the historical manuscript collection and the institutional records

Jane says she has enjoyed the cool mountain weather since moving to Carson City especially during her early morning runs. She is looking forward to exploring the great state of Nevada and the surrounding region.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Wednesday Evening Program

October 9th:

BAY AREA RAIL ADVENTURE

Bill Kohler and John Frink

SYMPOSIUM

October 18-20

The V&T and its Impact on the Cities it Served

Steam Train Schedule

October 20-Symposium

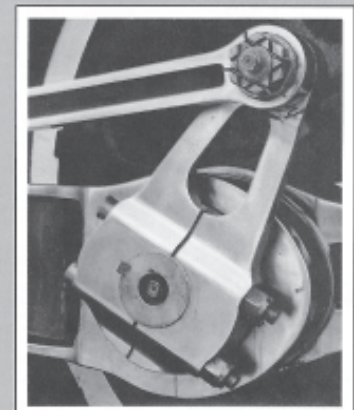
October 26-Nevada Day

November 29-30
Thanksgiving weekend

December 14-15
Santa Train

New Exhibit:

Tribute to Another Era:
The Railroad Photography of
Gordon Osmundson



Through 2002

Continued From Page 1

Tahoe and converted into wood products in the company sawmills at Glenbrook. It was hauled from Glenbrook to Spooner's Summit by the company's narrow-gauge railroad, the Carson & Tahoe Lumber & Fluming Company, where it connected with the Clear Creek Flume which brought the wood and lumber down Clear Creek canyon to the flume yard at the base of mountain, just south of the current location of the Nevada State Railroad Museum.

The Clear Creek flume divided into three spurs through the length of the wood and lumberyard. The wood yard was filled almost to capacity with about 30,000 cords, while the lumberyard contained several million board feet of sawed timbers and planks. Fluming season was almost finished. The wood was tinder dry. Fire could not have happened at a worse time.

A road under the flume separated the wood yard from the lumberyard. Flames were first spotted at the northern edge of the wood yard, close to the road. The firemen deployed their three fire engines at the road to keep the flames from spreading to the valuable lumber. Water from these engines checked the northward advance of the fire but the flames spread west and south out of control. The entire wood yard was at risk.

Half the population of Carson City turned out to help. People either fell into line on a bucket brigade or joined a daring crew that moved wood from the great piles to create a firebreak south of the flames. Cordwood, which had been cut to 4-foot lengths for fluming was heavy and the men tired quickly, but there were always volunteers ready and willing to step in whenever a worker became exhausted.

As the flames spread the entire width of the wood yard and advanced south towards the firebreak workers, it became questionable whether the workers would have enough time to clear the firebreaks and save about 20,000 cords at the south end. Calls for help were placed by telegraph to Reno, Virginia City and Gold Hill. At Reno, the Central Pacific Railroad donated its yard locomotive, No. 48, which was equipped with a water pump capable of throwing two streams of water on the flames. The V&T gave No. 48 a clear track to Carson City.

The V&T's other yard locomotive, the No. 21 *Mexico* (nee *J. W. Bowker*), which was also equipped with a powerful water pump atop its boiler, was called to the scene from Virginia. The Virginia City Fire Department donated Monumental Engine Co. No. 6's steamer, the *Big Six*, and the Gold Hill Fire Department provided the steamer of Yellow Jacket Engine Co. No. 2. These were the two newest and most powerful steam fire engines on the Comstock. The Monumental firehouse was located on the Divide, so the *Big Six* was rolled down the grade into Gold Hill where it, the Yellow Jacket No. 2 steamer, and a hose cart were loaded onto flat cars. The *Mexico* coupled onto the train left im-

The glow was so brightly visible at Virginia City that some residents thought it was Gold Hill on fire.

mediately upon being telegraphed that the track was clear. It navigated the trestles and curves along the 21-mile route as fast as the engineer dared and arrived at the fire scene south of Carson only 36 minutes after it left Gold Hill. The Monumental and Yellow Jacket steamers were deployed to the south end of the fire to cover the men working on the firebreaks. Doc Benton's horses maneuvered the *Big Six* into position.

By 10:30 p.m. seven fire engines were at work, throwing steady streams of water on the fire. Despite their efforts, the fire formed a continuous sheet of flames that leaped high into the sky as it consumed almost an acre of cordwood. The glow from the conflagration was so brightly visible at Virginia City that some residents thought that it was Gold Hill that was on fire.

Fortunately, water was plentiful. Ditches and cisterns were available to the fire crews. The V-flume supports burned and the flumes collapsed to prodigiously flood the ground

and ditches with water that the bucket crews and fire engines were able to use to good advantage.

By about 1 a.m. the firebreak crews had completed their task. They had moved perhaps 500 cords of firewood in six hours. This created a bare swath through four or five rows of cordwood. Although the fire still raged an hour later its potential for further damage was contained by the firebreak. It was decided that the two steamers from the Comstock were no longer required so the crews packed up and returned home aboard a special 2 a.m. train. However, Central Pacific No. 48 stayed at the scene for almost 24 hours while crews of the S. T. Swift Fire Company worked for 36 continuous hours to ensure that the fire didn't flare up again.

The cause of the fire was never ascertained. Watchmen had shooed two or three tramps from the wood yard shortly before the fire was discovered. Authorities were unable to determine whether the fire was accidental or intentional.

The loss was limited to 8,500 cords of firewood. None of the expensive timbers and sawed lumber burned. Yerington and Bliss were fully insured. Afterwards, Duane L. Bliss donated \$500 to S. T. Swift Engine Company, \$200 to Curry Engine Company No. 2, and \$400 apiece to the Yellow Jacket and Monumental Engine Companies in appreciation for their volunteer services. Other expenses totaled about \$800, including horse teams provided by Benton's Stables and "refreshments" provided by John T. Pantland of the Ormsby House.

The triumph to limit the loss was accomplished through unselfish teamwork. Many residents worked late into the night. The volunteer fire companies bravely fought the inferno. The Virginia & Truckee and the Central Pacific railroads moved five of the seven fire engines to the scene.

Afterward, a Carson City reporter noted, "...artistically, it was the most beautiful sight we ever witnessed. The brightness and shadow blended as it only could in the clear combination of a Nevada atmosphere and valley."

Dr. Rich Pitter

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Fire Comments by H. M. Yerington

H. M. Yerington had a very different perspective on the matter. In reporting the fire to the V&T's president Darius Ogden Mills, Yerington made the following comments:

"I have now to tell you of a serious misfortune that befell us Friday night, and all through the infernal "Cussedness" of some scoundrels for whom hanging would be far too good - The enclosed slip, from last night's "Tribune", gives the facts very fairly and I can only add that it was only by the hardest kind of work, & bringing to our aid Va, Gold Hill & Reno fire engines that the loss was not greater, for if the fire had gotten in the lumber & wood this side of the wagon road that passes under the flumes I don't know what

would have been the result - the fire was Certainly Caused by three incendiaries, for One of the watchmen, who had been at the spot a few minutes previous to the fire, on his return saw three men who ran away in the darkness and were afterwards seen away up the line of the flume where they robbed two of the cabins of watchmen, Coal oil was used for the fire spread with wonderful alacrity, & was out of the reach of our men stationed in the yard in no time, Grant & other Insurance man are now at the flumes with Bliss & I presume there will be no trouble in our being paid for all it Cost - I am not exactly clear on the 3000 Cords said by the paper to belong to the V&T, it was a portion of the Manogue wood & I can't tell whether it was in the burnt lot until I examine our

policies and diagrams of flumes tomorrow. All the R. R. wood we have in those yards are insured @ \$5 at all events- I presume Mr. Bliss will write you more fully about the fire as soon as he gets through with the insurance Agts"

"Yesterday (November 5th) Bliss made a very satisfactory settlement with the insurance Cos for the wood burned, paying him \$20,000 down & the bal in a few days - so we got out of the scrape, both in regard to quantity of wood burned, the sum rec^d, &c, fully as well as we Could expect. I now find the V&T did not own any of the burned wood, it all being in other sections of the yard"

Thanks to Charlie Siebenthal-eds

Meet Volunteer Bev Smith

Bev Smith is little noticed about the Nevada State Railroad Museum, though he has been a five and half-year member before he and his wife of 31 years moved to Carson City. There is a reason for this. Bev spent 31 years as a **PBX** repairman with the phone company in **Ventura**. He left the company in 1981, and facing retirement pay in California, which would be taxed as income, they moved to Carson City. Bev has been a **railfan** since 1945.

Shortly after moving here, Bev volunteered at the museum. His hobbies had included using power tools in cabinet making, among other things. So it was natural that he would apply to work in the museum's shop facility. **Bev's** latest project was making the patterns for castings of the two driving wheels for the **McKeen** car, and

they will be ready for shipping to the foundry shortly. First, he has to finish the patterns for the metal work to secure the seats in the car to the floor. This work is very meticulous and he carefully finishes each item with handwork. On one of the spokes on a drive

**He recalls it as if
"an ammo dump
blew up!"**

wheel will be in small letters "**NSRM** Bev Smith" suggested by Chris **DeWitt**, restoration supervisor. Thus Bev will have a long-lasting connection with the museum.

Bev spent the years 1942 to 1945 as a crew chief of mechanics on B-29s at an airfield in Texas for the U.S. Air Force, and was part of the force at White Sands in early 1945 when



they exploded the first atomic blast. He recalls it as if "an ammo dump blew up!"

Bev and his wife never had any children in the 31 years of their marriage, and his wife died in October of 2000. Bev is a quiet sort of fellow, interesting to talk with, and a credit to the railroad museum as a volunteer. —The Yard Bull

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Check one:

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- ☐ Sustaining \$100
- ☐ Contributing \$250

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Thank you for your membership. You will be receiving your membership packet in the mail.
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